

Panel 4 – Tools for enhancing gender mainstreaming – from political will to e-solutions
Lillemor Dahlgren

Introduction

The Swedish government has assigned itself as well as 60 of its agencies to work actively with gender mainstreaming in 2013-2018, as part of the GMGA programme, Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies. As of this year, the government has set up a similar program for the state-funded higher education institutions, which runs up until the end of 2019. Even if I will focus my presentation and discussion on the GMGA programme, please know that the setup is similar for the higher education one.

Sweden has adopted gender mainstreaming as its main strategy to achieve gender equality already back in the mid-90s, that is, over 20 years ago. This strategy has been combined with special measures to push development in different specific policy areas. One would think that after over 20 years working with this main strategy, we would have gotten further. Still, when some researchers criticize the strategy, I would like to think that it is not so much the strategy in itself to blame for our shortcomings, but our approach, our use, our understanding and misconceptions of it. That is what I would like to share with you today.

Most often I am asked to share good examples and success stories from the programme, and am faced with disappointment when I bring up the lessons learned and shortcomings. However, I consider the identification of our shortcomings part of the success. Once we identify what is not working, we can do something about it, and make it work. I know many other countries struggling with the same problems regarding gender mainstreaming. And I believe our lessons learned can also be very beneficial for those who are yet to begin their work with gender mainstreaming – who then can avoid the common mistakes and do right from the beginning.

Several attempts to get the gender mainstreaming work going has been done over the years, some more successful than others, but very few stick and last. Why is that? First, every time it has been set up in a very contradictive manner – as a short time project or programme with a clear starting and finishing point. This contradicts the strategy of gender mainstreaming and what it is supposed to be. It cannot be set up as a project, and our work is never done. Secondly, gender mainstreaming is far too often set up as a goal rather than a strategy to reach a goal, so it becomes far too concentrated on the technical process of things rather than the problem it is set up to fix. Thirdly I believe we have gotten stuck on an aspect of gender having to adapt to what we normally do. Over the years I have developed an allergy towards the word “natural”, as I have read it so many times over and over in the agencies action plans. “Gender is to become a natural part of...” What I read into it, is that gender is to adapt. This is what we do, and how we do it, stick some gender onto it, and that is it. What I read into natural is that it should make no fuss or

question what we normally do or how we do it. But if we are to succeed, gender mainstreaming much likely will require change, make fuss and disturb. If it runs smoothly, feels easy... it is probably not making much of a difference at all.

With this current programme I would like to believe that we are on to something. The setup of the programme is in itself a success factor. To get an understanding of it, you need to know how the chain of command in den public administration works in Sweden. All government agencies are regulated by instructions and letters of regulation. The work is followed up by the agency's ministry yearly, but also in regular dialogues. With this in mind, you can probably see how crucial it is to have the government office itself very active in this programme. The government office has to identify the gender equality problems they want their agencies to solve, as well as follow up. We all have to keep in mind that this is not a project, and we will not be done year 2018. What we are to achieve by the end of that year is a set structure for the on-going work.

During the programme, a support structure has been set up, and that is my organisation – The Swedish secretariat for gender research at the University of Gothenburg. We have our bigger assignments from the Swedish government, as well as the Nordic council of ministers, but also take on smaller and shorter assignments.

Being the support to the government office as well as agencies is quite a challenge, considering the size of the programme. Now including 60 agencies with very different needs, as well as different fields and areas. Not to mention the size of the agencies, varying from around 12 people to over 35 000. To give you a sense of the variety, and mention a few: the tax agency, the military, the public health agency, pension agency, the social insurance administration, the Swedish Police as well as the Sami parliament. But it is a beneficial and much appreciated support, and also the main cost for the programme in all. Because the agencies do not receive any extra funding for this work, it is to be done within their ordinary budget. In the beginning, when we only had 18 pilots in the programme, they had the opportunity to seek extra funding for the first year. This has in many ways proved not to have been as beneficial as one would think, but rather created obstacles. It made it far too easy to set up as a project, and harder to get into the core of the ordinary business of things. So if money is to be invested in regards to gender mainstreaming from a government standpoint – focus it on a support system, and preferably a fixed, and not a temporary one.

Other areas to discuss

What is the problem?

Initially most want to know "what to do" but we try to change it around to "what is the problem". That is, what is the problem you are to solve with gender mainstreaming? In the assignment to the agencies it is said that they are to contribute to the Swedish gender equality objective giving women and men equal power to shape society and their own lives. But the objective in itself does not tell us what the problem is or what the

government want to be done about it. If it is that women have less power than men (as we know), would it then be ok to just give men as little power, or do we want women to have more power. It has to be more concrete, and also broken down within the different policy areas, related to the specific agencies' work. As of today, with a feminist government, this is moving in the right direction, as all ministers work with a gender perspective on their specific areas, as well as gender budgeting.

What we mean with "what is the problem": what gender inequality is it that we are to take part in fixing, what is our role in this, what can we do to contribute? Do we focus on the symptoms or do we actually take part in curing the disease?

Steering of the programme

About the steering within the programme. Here we have a couple of challenges to present connected to steering, or sometimes lack of. As for us, as a support structure, we do not have the authority to steer the agencies at all. This can be a challenge, especially when it comes to the understanding and definition of gender mainstreaming. We are highly dependent on the ministries and government, which fortunately is supported today by an ongoing and close dialogue with them.

Add women and stir?

An on-going challenge is to keep focus on the core. That is, keep focus on what we do and those we do it for, rather on who we are and who is doing the work. But also stretch the work further than equality in numbers as the only solution. "Add women and stir" is NOT a solution. The talk about equality in numbers, the belief that we will achieve gender equality only by adding women (or in some sectors: men). There is an important aspect of equality in numbers, and this is a matter of justice and non-discrimination. But we make it far too easy if we believe that a 50/50 representation in itself will lead to gender equality. It is very important to highlight this, and we often struggle to get this across.

Knowledge and training

Lack of basic knowledge and understanding on all levels of society creates a great demand on a support structure like ours. We could offer basic trainings on a daily basis, but it is like a big dark hole, impossible to fill. What often strikes me the most is that I am confronted with highly professionals with higher education, but without any knowledge or understanding regarding gender. By integrating knowledge on gender in higher education, and education as a whole. At the same time, we do constantly point out that this IS an area of knowledge, is not a matter of common sense or attitudes – but we cannot let us be fooled to think that only trainings will solve the problem, that we can train the staff and be done with it. The training has to be followed by action. Another aspect of this is that not all can be required to become gender equality experts on a research level. A deeper knowledge and understanding is needed for the more advanced parts of the work, as within any other area, either within your organisation or take help from outside. There is no check list or handbook in the world to cover up for lack of understanding and knowledge.

Is there a quick fix?

Everybody wanting a quick fix. Especially with the higher demands on the agencies with several parallel assignments: diversity, child perspective, environment, you name it. So the agencies would want to find a way to address it all in an efficient and very compact way, but each and every assignment requires knowledge and understanding of the matter at hand. Quite often we are also asked for some kind of quick fix in regards to gender equality on its own. Perhaps an agency wants us to concentrate a training to simply an hour, ask us to skip the problem and theory part, and jump into the "what to do" part. Just tell us what to do. But no one will do, or do well, if they do not understand why.